# Elsewhere: an essay

by Rachel Layton

For the fourth of July, my boyfriend, his brother and I take a weekend trip to McCarthy which is supposedly an eight hour drive from Fairbanks, but Alaskans know it really takes ten. The men rent a GMC with leather seats, glossy blue paint, and a towing hitch for the ’60s camper we spent the last month renovating. All month my boyfriend, Garrett, worked fourteen hour days as a diesel mechanic at a gold mine out of town before returning home and installing new taillights. He sawed two by fours into a bed- frame and a bench. Rewired lights, tore out rotted wood, installed insulation. I painted win- dow trim and brought him beer. He reminds me of the men I grew up with in Mississippi. His grit; his handle-things-as-they-are attitude. I often think he would fit better in my hometown than me. I have moved so far to find someone who re- sembles so much of what I’ve grown away from. Garrett’s brother drives us to McCarthy, stopping every hour to check the bearings on the camper which are overheating. Each time they re- turn from their check, it’s a roulette of them claiming I think it'll make it and not looking good. My new life in Alaska is full of vehicles malfunc- tioning, men betting against their own odds, and riding passenger self-soothing—I haven’t died yet. We make it the first hour to Salcha, and the boys point out a small river their grandparents used to boat on in summers. They have such stark memories of childhood it frightens me how connected they are, existing in a place where every memory they possess was formed. The sec- ond hour out of Fairbanks is Delta Junction, a drive-by town of gas stations and RVs for sale roadside. We stop for fuel, and my boyfriend feels the camper’s bearings. They are not looking good. I ask the universe for a sign that the camper is going to survive this trip. Universe, show me a moose if we’re going to make it. Show me a moose if things will work out. Garrett later tells me that sometimes he prays, and this ride he was praying. The fourth hour outside of Fairbanks, we pass a petite, boney beast with its head dipped into the highway-side pond. She is thin for a moose, and her neck stays dipped in the glassy rainwater, headless. Garrett calls the pools that form at the edge of the highways here moose holes. It’s the first one I’ve spotted since moving. The camper makes it through the winding roads of Summit, the aptly named Rainbow Mountain sliding down from the above in iron- shades of copper and nickel. The boys talk about old mining shafts hidden in the rocks. I scan the slopes for sheep. The camper makes it to Chitna—a rustic village along the Copper River known for its salmon runs which are happening right now. As we press through the gap between boulders that divide the edge of Chitna from the bridge over the river, I see half a dozen land rovers down below in the mucky, splintering river. Bald eagles circle in tight cyclones, talons flexed. The camper even survives the two hour crawl down a gravel road, where the men pull over to piss and end up wrestling, head-locking one another, until Garrett who is seven years older and half a foot taller topples his brother, and they dive back into the cab dirt-dusted and laughing.

I’m a serial mover. Now in my mid-twenties, I’ve moved half a dozen times. From my rural Mississippi hometown with its cricks and mud- ding tracks and roadside ice cream to Cologne for my dad’s piloting job, to Memphis for college. A study abroad in Frankfurt and brief return to Memphis. Another year later, and I moved to Missouri for my MFA. Less than a month after graduating, I uprooted yet again to Dallas, and in the process, surrendered my budding journal- ism career and writing cohort. I have this deep craving for change. In my mind, when I leave, I am moving forward, no matter what good I’ve just left. I stayed in Dallas ten months then—upon finding nothing but bar- tending and higher rent—abandoned that place to resettle in my once-long-distance boyfriend’s hometown of Fairbanks, Alaska. In this last bit of my twenties, I’ve accepted displacement is comforting to me. Even as a kid who’d never left Mississippi, I sensed I was not home. My constant relocation has left my writing career stunted, misplaced. I will get close to some- thing I want, then fall. Then start anew, then fail. Then relocate, try, fail, repeat. I fear I have be- come a bad writer post-MFA. I don’t work in the industry the way my cohort does—bartending supporting me ever since undergrad. When I write now, it feels like I’m failing. During our three-day stay in McCarthy, I imagine I’ve always been Alaskan, though I have been here just three months. In other places, my quick assimilating has left me feeling false, but in McCarthy, I feel my body recall its childhood. The last time I’d ridden a four-wheeler I was ten, but sixteen years later, I hold myself steady on the back wheel, bracing for potholes and bumps along the backcountry trails. I thought I’d be afraid, but I’m not. McCarthy’s year-round population online is listed at 107, but the locals know it’s just around a dozen. Yet on fourth of July, the grounds out-side the single, narrow iron bridge that crosses white rapids into town swell with military fam- ilies, hippies, and off-roaders. We take our four- wheeler across the bridge to get into McCarthy, which is just a block of five or six log buildings. One bar simply called Bar. One restaurant bewil- deringly named The Potato. A rustic museum. A general store selling everything from native-made earrings to condoms to cold cuts and mustard. McCarthy is what David Lynch probably envi- sioned Twin Peaks to be. Isolate, odd, alien in the massive swath of mountains nudged into even wider glaciers which in turn pool outside of town into crystal blue ponds. Still safe for the handful of icebergs bobbing in their nucleolus.

Upon moving to Fairbanks, I took a sea- sonal job bartending at a corporate hotel for tourists who experience two weeks of tour-bus- tracked Alaska. In the lower 48, I spent all five years of college and grad school in fine-dining, but now, I work at a disorganized, frozen-food bar & grill because it’s temporary. The nomadic qual- ity of my seasonal coworkers seems to permit my own impermanence. A colony of little aliens, va- cationing in some distant place. Our real lives halted. People’s favorite question at the hotel is, are you from here? They say it with awe in their eyes, like someone’s first time seeing a wild kangaroo. Those things actually exist? I tell them that I live here now which invariably leads them to ask, Where are you from? I’m from Memphis most days, which feels true. I went to half of high school and all of un- dergrad there. I remember the street names, mos- quito bitten dates along the Mississippi. I had nicknames, hideouts, friend groups. My accent, when it shows, is easily mistakable for Tennes- sean even though in earnest, it’s Mississippian

which is slower than Tennessee's. My hometown, an hour into Mississippi, is called Olive Branch. I grew up completely unaware we lived anywhere near a major city. The slow trudge of rural south I took for granted. I didn't discover Memphis until my early teens. Memphis felt like home be- cause it was not Mississippi, but I grew detached. I got in fights, slept with people I shouldn't have, and the town grew unfamiliar around me. I wonder, when I left for my MFA program, if I really moved to write at all, or if I left to leave. Sometimes, I tell hotel guests I'm from Mis- souri, my preferred state, so we can talk Chiefs, and they may hand me a few extra dollars when they leave for Denali the next day. I claim Texas to the beer-bellied drunks with their Cowboys ballcaps, and we talk shit on the rich Texans. They lament the old Texas, the one they remember. When I hear a Mississippian accent, I'll give the name of my real hometown. To be from some- where is an advantage. Your life becomes con- tained. As a writer, I often feel fragmented between selves. Explaining where I am from leaves me feeling the same.

In McCarthy, the weekend passes in stills. A fourth of July parade consisting of five floats and an emcee mysteriously dressed head to toe in a rubber alien costume passing out stickers that read Aliens of Alaska Are REAL. We take pictures with this Alaskan Alien alongside a drove of young daughters there with Garrett's childhood friend. We drink at the one bar, and my boy- friend's brother dances with a petite girl in a but- terfly crop-top and a black bob. Garrett and I leave them to each other, return to the camper to see milky white trails jump unnaturally in the sky. These are the northern lights. He says he's never seen them in summer like that, when the sun never fully sets, but sure as anything, it's them. Pale and swollen, moving without motion. Our last day, the three of us take the four- wheeler several miles out to Kennicott mining camp, an abandoned copper mine that is the sole mother of McCarthy's existence today. We ride past the displays of old shops and cabins with their plastic fruit and glass-encased kitchen uten- sils and into the empty mountain path. I wrap an arm around Garrett, leaning harder into his side as the trail grows steeper. It reminds me of traversing the sharp cliff edges of New Zealand in my rented Kia last year, and I wonder how I have gone from solo New Zealand car camping to wrapping myself around a man on a mountain in Alaska. I wonder if this is really all that differ- ent than racing forest-lined backroads as a kid or speeding my dad's stolen Audi through a Mem- phis summer. Did any one of those places truly feel all that different than the other? As a kid, I saw the South as all arms of the same beast, vilifying the whole region. I claimed it was not my home, but the further I have trav- elled, the more I ache for its familiarity, its sim- plicity. At some point I became so complicated. My love scattered all across these places I thought I despised. Now, as far away as I have ever dreamed of being, I reach back to it. I put on my accent. I listen to Zach Bryan and Keith Urban and Shania Twain. My boyfriend will tell me how to change a tire, use a wrench, line up a door hinge, and I'll wave him off. I know how. I'm from the South.

The weather cooperates until we reach the end of the drivable path at the mouth of a still snowy hiking trail. None of us are dressed for the freezing rain that falls, and my leggings and wind- breaker are soaked, so we go back down the mountain, ripping corners and lurching through mud pits. It's miserable—I'm warm-blooded by ge- netics. I used to say the only part I loved of the South was that feeling, walking outside and the humidity wrapping itself around you like a dryer- warmed

blanket. Yet, now I’m freezing, and still

laughing and yelling. Turning my face to the sky because real Alaskans love this. The next morning as we drive back down the gravel road connecting McCarthy to Chitna, I let the boys shit-talk as I stare out the window. The whole weekend, I felt suspended, beamed into extraterrestrial light. But as we trudge further down the gravel, I wonder if my changes are not suspended but solidifying. I touch my hand to the window, and the chill cools my palm. I drift off to Garrett recalling a story of boyhood to his brother.

After returning to Fairbanks from McCar- thy, Garrett and I spend a Saturday at the county fair. Alaska has boroughs, not counties like the lower 48, but I guess county sounds more civ- ilized. Like most festivals in interior Alaska, the fair is rusted and busy. An old school Ferris wheel spinning slow in the center, the rest of the vendors bleeding out from this pinnacle like spokes of a wheel. We walk through aisles of street food, games, artisans and artists. Every few feet, it seems, Garrett runs into someone he knows. Family friends, high school classmates, coworkers. Back when I lived in Dal- las and Garrett would visit, we went to hockey games and parades, and though he kept up, I knew he was not used to the metropolis crush. The seething of dozens of strangers fighting desperately to pick a bar with the shortest line, to elbow through bachelorette parties and families. There is anonymity in big cities, and most days in Dallas I felt I blended into the parade of faces. I used to want that, to be wiped clean. But as Garrett laughs and hugs and introduces his transplant girlfriend to people he's known since diapers, I wonder if I missed watching the slow- ness of change happen around me. Garrett has spent his entire life in Fairbanks. When I am with him, I cosplay being local. He is blue-collar and comfortable in his surround- ings of mountain roads, four-wheeler trails, fish- ing boats. He makes it easy for me to look the part—outfitting me in Xtra-Tuff boots, rain jackets, Alaskan-branded hoodies. I thought I would feel extraterrestrial in a place where even the clothing must be strategic, but I'm a fast learner. After so many places, wherever I am may as well be where I'm from. Why not dress the part? One of the stalls we pass at the fair is a wood- carving stand, one where they take custom orders and carve the grain right in front of you. I'm a few feet ahead of Garrett when I read one of their premade signs: Fairbanks doesn't grow on you, so much as it makes you unfit to live elsewhere. I point it out to him. "I'll get that for you," he says. "I don't need it." "Yes, you do," he says, already handing the artist his cash. The wood phrase whispers to my writer- brain. Could I really be made unfit for the south—for Appalachia, the delta, the homeness of it all? I want to write how it is to try and fail at being elsewhere.

When I settled in Missouri, I began fitting into the puzzle of other people's lives. I drank too much. I got a boyfriend and was angry that he did not understand who I had been before him, that I needed to mourn what once was. I re- sented that I was still bartending. I tried to me- morialize what I had once been in Memphis and wrote incessantly of dim bars, emerald kayak runs, Dr. Peppers on Front Street. This chaos I confused for traction. I wrote of Germany and its cool summers, quiet bars, long train rides. My MFA thesis was all wine-soaked tales of young women indoctrinated in the lifestyle of sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll. My thesis director said I was writing about

my past selves and because of this, wasn't able to manipulate these characters into something new by the conclusions of my stories. He told me I should write nonfiction, and when I did, he told me I should write of Mississippi which I tried and failed and eventually, let go. I left so long ago, but it still feels too close. During my thesis defense—an event I had felt would propel me into my new life of success— whatever had driven my writing up to then was lost. The commentary was the same as every other workshop. One member failed to finish reading my thesis altogether. I felt untalented and disinteresting. When I stepped out for the committee to finalize their thoughts, I stood too close to the door and heard my director say, We should tell her something nice when she gets back. I knew writing would always be fraught with disappointment. I'd handled rejections from magazines, fellowships, and residencies. I don't know why this random comment I wasn't meant to hear gutted me. It felt like, Let the girl think she did good. Let her think she belongs.

One day in late summer, Garrett and I are sitting on the couch in his log house. Since over- coming so much distance, I feel like we are build- ing something together. Beside him, I say, "I saw a reel of a comic talking about Fairbanks the other day." "What he'd say?" "That it's the worst place he's ever been," I say. "Bullshit. I've been a lot of places, and Fair- banks is definitely the best." I'm not sure if he's truly loves his hometown this much or if he's just come to the same con- clusion I have. It's taken me half a dozen new states and hometowns to come to see place is amorphous and fickle. Maybe wherever you stick is where you belong in the end. Garrett and I met at a wedding in Kentucky a few years ago. I had been living in Dallas only a handful of weeks. He's the first person to enter my life post-MFA, and it feels like he missed out on the before-me. In Missouri, I was driven and writerly and involved. Since we've met, my rela- tionship with writing has felt like that of an ex. The few times I've talked about my dreams of a career, I cannot get through the words fast enough before I'm waving away the notion of wanting it at all. It's comfortable for me to settle into who he is and has been. I live in his home- town. I see his friends, have dinner with his family. Realistically, he'll never have to see any- thing that's mine. Sometimes I like this. Some- times I wish it was as easy for him to know the entirety of me, too. Garrett talks about the South like a tourist in the way I probably have about Alaska—the hunting, the catfish, the intimidating humidity. I have no way to drag together all my timelines and selves for him to examine. How can someone dissect a life they've heard only rumors of? When my lack of a writing career gets to me, I fantasize about moving back to Missouri, theo- rizing how that place could hypothetically fix what I feel is lost. After so much moving and dis- tance and time, I feel just as I did in childhood. Homesick. Sometimes Alaska feels like Missis- sippi, and I wonder if there's enough here for me. Though I've been homesick most of my life, there's rarely a place I am homesick for. Missouri comes close. It's the only place I have roots— friends, the ability to navigate without maps. I'm not sure if this is what defines a home to most people. Maybe there's more to it that I just can't know. Since most of my friends everywhere I've lived are locals, I think I enjoy experiencing their locality parasitically. I spend just enough time to know their lore, their reality, the history of their places. If identity is rooted in location, am I des- tined to remain lost?

Garrett is gone for long stretches of time for work, out in the Yukon or on the infamous North Slope oil rigs. When he's gone too long, I threaten to go back to Missouri or Tennessee or Texas. I don't think I mean it. Over my first winter, I spend months alone in the dark cold. Returning to my studio apartment, resenting something. I miss my homes, but I don't go home. I should be used to missing things, but it gets more intense, more pervasive the longer I spend missing. Like we all are born with only so much missing inside us, and I've gone through my supply in record time. I see there's a life I could build in Alaska, and I'm not convinced it's worth throwing away. Then I wonder if I'll stay just because I've grown unable to live elsewhere. Because I can't seem to stop leaving, I know something in me must love being lost. There's a need to reassure myself I can survive on my own. I've done an excellent job at convincing myself nothing is permanent though I'm the only one in my life to ever leave. It verges on obsession, how compulsively I test my ability to rebuild. I ask Garrett what it was like to grow up in Alaska because I want to know what makes some- one stay. If he's ever thought being from a small place made him small, too. "I've always been happy I was born here," he says when I ask. He did leave once. After high school, to col- lege in Idaho for engineering, but after one semester, he returned to Fairbanks and dropped out of college in favor of his current union job. I've asked him why he came back, and every time he says it the same. I wanted to be here. Not that he didn't like Idaho, but that he wanted to be home.

The first time I realized leaving had been a mistake was the day I got to Dallas. I had two cats and a mound of dismantled furniture tossed into my out-of-budget apartment. I walked into the "luxury" apartment I'd so carefully selected, and it smelled like cigarettes and bad weed. I lifted the blinds of the balcony door to look out at my new city and found it looked directly into the back of an Auto-Zone where the unhoused pop- ulation had built makeshift camp. There were needles and 40s littered across the asphalt. I started laughing a long, crazy laugh like they do in movies. I knew this would not be the change I'd been chasing. Instead of committing to a new life as I have every other time, I spent my ten months in Dallas interrogating why I couldn't stay in Missouri. What was I so afraid of? I felt Missouri was too small, too limited. My thesis defense left me hu- miliated over my attempts at being a writer. I'd idealized living in a metropolis my whole life. I missed the South. I wanted to feel important, and I didn't. Eventually after arriving in Dallas, my Mis- souri roommate went to rehab, and my friends at my old job quit and found new jobs, and the magazine I freelanced for changed hands. When the opportunity to move instead to Alaska pre- sented, I told myself Missouri would still be there and it will, in some iteration. At the start of winter, Garrett and I discuss two possible vacations—a week away in Hawaii or a week in Missouri. I don't tell him that I'm afraid if I return and my people are different or if I am different, it will strip my belief that I have any home at all. I pick Hawaii and browse bikinis on fast fashion sites, and he doesn't push me on why. In mid-winter, I interview with a local maga- zine that offers seventeen dollars an hour and no healthcare. With my seasonal hotel job now closed down, I take what I can get as a full time liquor distributor. My life takes on new structure working a nine to five. I pick up boxing and cycle classes. I cook, apply for copywriting side gigs, go to brunch with girls from my gym. My best

friend’s mom tells me, I can’t believe you moved there of all places. And now you’re so integrated in the place. Like you’ve been there forever. Maybe I can belong, and yet—I stay on a month-to-month lease. I dodge my boyfriend’s at- tempts at moving in. I keep it surface level with the gym girls at brunch. There is something in me that is not content with here—and here being anywhere—as home. I wonder if moving for love is sustainable. I wonder if moving for any other reason would matter.

Before I left Memphis, I had a falling out with a good friend of mine. When we were close, our favorite topic was how we were going to get out. Looking back, neither of us truly believed the other would do it. When I did move away roughly a year after our friendship ended, I had this sort of petty vindication. I accomplished The Thing, and you did not. It was spiteful, but at the heart of it, I wished I had her to share my little triumph with. Then, four years later, she texts me wanting to catch up. Turns out she had made her own great escape and now lives in Portland. She’s never given a reason why she reached out. My theory is that her own departure from our hometown sparked nostalgia for our old talks. Not one of our old friends has ever left. We’re alone in that regard, so I can see why she’d think of me. It’s like Memphis is frozen in amber, she told me not long ago. Everyone is doing the same struggle, burning out.

I’m not convinced I miss home as much as I miss my own motion. It’s harder to write because all of my selves can exist on the page, yet the per- son I was in each feels elusive. I pour the chaos on the page, braid the timelines, play with struc- ture and form until it resembles something of myself, but I can never find the conclusion. Maybe my thesis director had me right. I morph things over and over but can’t illuminate what they’ve become. I wonder if part of why I am in Alaska is because it signals an ending. I cannot go farther than this, not from Mississippi and not from society as I have known it. I ache and ache to find this deep sense of clarity, but only now am I be- ginning to see past the glitter of my own chaos. Life in Fairbanks is small, personal. You keep a good man, a stable job, a studio apartment. Values not much different than where I’m from. Here, you win a yearly vacation to Hawaii, a call back home. I think I first wanted to write to me- morialize my many places and selves. Lend narra- tive to my nomadism. When people ask me where I want to be now, I have only a draft. I want to be elsewhere, then I want to come home.

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